Sermon for 3rd Sunday of Easter Year B

Readings: Acts 3:1-20; Luke 24:36b-48

Text: Acts 3.7 Then Peter took him by his right hand and helped him up.

i

Throughout the NT there are hints that Peter and John are rivals. Peter is the appointed chief, the “Rock” on which Christ can build his Church; yet John seems to be the one who is known as “the beloved disciple”.

At the Last Supper it is noted that John, the Beloved disciple, gets closest to Jesus, which is presumably where Peter ought to have been as the designated leader.

On Easter morning they both run to the tomb; John, if the “other disciple” was John as most of us suspect, stopped at the entrance despite arriving first – Peter – impetuous as ever – assumes the right to walk in to the tomb and check it out – and whilst Peter saw only the evidence of an empty tomb – John goes in after him and sees the grave clothes, but claims to have seen **and believed** – thus being the first of the disciples to believe in the Resurrection. Peter will require a separate Resurrection appearance later that day.

At the lakeside it is John who recognises Jesus standing on the shore first, but Peter jumps into the water to get to him before John.

Yet here in Acts 3 we see the two working happily together; the intuitive, reflective one, John alongside the action –man, roll up your sleeves and get on with it type, Peter. The Church needs both types.

She needs the thinkers, those who work hard and deep with ideas. Theology matters – theology gives meaning to any actions we take as Christians and is the two-edged sword that must be wielded in the world of competing religions and ideologies.

As St. Paul says in 2 Cor 10:5 – “We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.”

Yet the Church doesn’t need just the thinkers and the talkers, but also the doers, such as Peter, who’s just crazy enough to try and put all that theology into practice and try to walk on water.

Here in Acts 3 we see them entering the temple and coming across a man lame from birth – Luke adds that bit of information to inform us that this was not a minor, temporary injury, but a permanent state of lameness.

“I order you,” says Peter, in his typically forthright, no –nonsense approach, “get up and walk.”

Note how they told him to fix his eyes upon them and how they looked straight into his eyes. There is no half-hearted, under-confident, embarrassed, slinking away from the challenge in John and Peter’s body language, but an unquestioning trust in the power that had come upon them at Pentecost.

Having told him to believe in the power of the name of Jesus Christ and get up and walk, they “help him up to his feet.” Having urged him to summon the greatest faith he has ever known in his life, to believe he can get up and walk, Peter and John do not stand back to see how he gets on, but go to his aid, reinforcing his determination and aiding his believing – this is a sign of the Church’s ministry to come.

ii

Having performed this miraculous deed, they have an audience prepared to listen to what they have to say. So how will they go about preaching the Good News?

Firstly, they will not be self-important about it. They do not claim the power as their own, but give all the glory to Christ. Sometimes we Christians get in the way of Christ rather than helping people find him. We act as if the main idea is to find us – rather than find Christ – when it should be the other way round. The Church is obviously irrelevant and a take-it-or-leave-it affair, until you find Christ. Only after you have found Christ does the Church become the natural place to belong.

The Church stands in a difficult place. On the one hand, it’s not the Good News itself – that is Jesus Christ; but on the other hand, the Church is indispensable to the Christian life, as soil is necessary to the seed.

As Calvin said, he who has God as his Father has the Church as his Mother.

The gospel writers know that their gospel takes a lot of believing. The Resurrection of Jesus from the dead is an extraordinary, unique event. We are all familiar with the fact that dead people remain dead. We have no other experience to back up their claim that Jesus was alive again in a new way and remains alive for ever. So they know they have to work hard to answer the natural doubts and questions that people will ask.

St Luke emphasises that the appearance of Jesus wasn’t like the appearance of a ghost – one natural explanation people would offer to discount the resurrection. Jesus had a body, a body that they could touch and which could eat; he was no ghost.

St John makes the same point with the Doubting Thomas story – acknowledging as does Luke in today’s passage – that even the disciples doubted at first. But later, Thomas can see and touch Jesus – and the resurrected Jesus can cook and eat breakfast on the Lakeside.

St Matthew tells us that the women at the tomb were greeted by an angel – itself a rare and strange-enough event – but at least one they could understand from the precedent of other stories of angelic visitation. They at least recognised what was happening to them.

They may also have witnessed people who were alive again in the normal way of being alive – even after they had apparently died – for these women may have been present when Jesus raised Lazarus, or Jairus’ daughter or the widow of Nain’s son.

But there was no precedent for meeting a man who had been resurrected from the dead. Jesus still bore the same scars as in his earthly life, but now his body appeared behind locked doors, or alongside two people walking down the road to Emmaus. The gospel writers know they have to explain something new and absolutely unique and they admit to the initial confusion, fear and doubts of the first disciples. St Matthew has the women depart from the angel “afraid and yet filled with joy” – that’s not a bad description of how all Christians should feel in the presence of Christ.

Jesus has not just come alive again, like Lazarus, but has been glorified, more like the Transfiguration.

It is within the fellowship of the Church that such extraordinary experiences are shared, tested and affirmed. It is among people who believe it is at least possible to have your heart strangely warmed by the Holy Spirit that you can share your own experience of a warmed heart; it is no good at all telling such a tale to people who do not believe there is a Holy Spirit – how can they objectively test and affirm the authenticity of your faith?

Whereas, within the Church you have 2,000 years-worth of experience of testing and affirming such experiences and your fellow Christians are free, because of their collective faith, to say yes, your experience sounds to be genuine, or no, we do not believe you have yet experienced the Holy Spirit.

For the Church exists to nurture our faith; the secular world seeks to dismiss it. It is the Church’s role to help people up to their feet and stand tall in faith.

The Church has enough experience to know the reality of God and so she has the freedom to speak up when she sees the absence of God – even among those who lay claim to it.

The Church is a testing ground for faith. She nurtures true faith, but she seeks to weed out false faith. That is why preaching the gospel is done within the fellowship of the Church and under the authority of the Church.

So we have the Church at work in both our readings today: In Luke, the Church acts as the nurturing womb where the seed of the Gospel can be safely received and grown to mature faith; in Acts, the Church is still present with Peter and John – the thinker and the doer – working in harmony together.

Too often the Church is weakened by dividing the Peters from the Johns. Too often we have those who want to dump all the evangelical baggage of personal conversion and growth in holiness and go for making a real difference in matters of social justice.

On the other side, we have evangelicals sometimes appearing to operate on a different planet from the rest of humanity. Earthly life is seen as a mere temporary inconvenience before we can get on with the real business of eternal life.

Sometimes, individual preachers use the Church as places where they can air and struggle with their own periods of doubt and confusion, rather than preaching the faith of the Church. This temptation is illustrated in John Wesley’s life when the doubting Wesley was told by Peter Boehler, the Moravian, to “preach faith until you have it.” Wesley had to put the Church’s faith before his own. After a short while, his personal faith caught up again. It would not have done that if he had taken to the pulpit to explain how he had lost his faith due to the disaster of his mission to America and he might have harmed other believers in the process.

Preachers have a responsibility to preach the faith of the Church, not their own private version of it and that includes the difficult bits too. In some centuries the difficult bits have been the call for social justice when a feudal society or a racially divided society didn’t want to hear that; in other times, such as the liberal secularism of today, the difficult bits have been personal salvation and growth in holiness.

Perhaps you still find it hard to believe that Jesus Christ is risen and alive with you today and that you are able to invite Jesus into your heart – in that wonderful evangelical clichéd way of putting it. Perhaps you’d prefer to think and speak about social justice and saving the planet.

Or perhaps you are irritated by all that social justice stuff and fed up to the back teeth of yet again having to discuss the rights and wrongs of same sex marriage or family violence. Perhaps you’d prefer less talk about global warming and more emphasis on prayer and saving souls.

But whether you see yourself as a Peter or a John – remember you cannot live an authentically Christian life without the Church that contains both.

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